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Source: *Journal of Near Eastern Studies*, Vol. 6, No. 2 (Apr., 1947), pp. 80-97

Published by: [The University of Chicago Press](#)

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THE GODDESSES OF THE EGYPTIAN TREE CULT¹

MARIE-LOUISE BUHL

NEITHER in prehistoric Egypt nor at any time since has the practice of forestry been conducted in the Nile Valley, and there has always been a lack of wood for the building of houses, ships, and the like. With regard to garden culture, however, the situation was quite different, for the Egyptians exercised remarkable talent in arranging their houses, temples, and tombs in the midst of gardens. This impression is clearly gained from pictures on the walls of tombs where, for example, one sees representations of gardens around the Pharaoh's palace² or estates of wealthy nobles with their groves of trees and their lakes or pools teeming with fish and gay with lotus blossoms.³

Investigation of the Egyptian attitude toward sacred trees reveals the fact that, in contrast to the animal cults, tree cults in the historical period began with purely local cults which at an early time became connected with nonlocal deities as their forms or attributes. Most plants other than trees played an important part only in magic, medicine, and folklore.

I. THE MOST IMPORTANT SACRED TREES IN ANCIENT EGYPT

Trees along the desert edge naturally took a prominent part in the tree cult, and the sycamore *nh.t*^a was one of the most important of all. The word has also

the meaning "refuge" when written with the house terminative instead of the tree.^b It is not surprising that the Egyptians should have believed that a spirit or goddess lived in a leafy tree with a well of water at its foot, and the sycamore assumed a primary position in Egyptian mythology and eschatology.

Among the other sacred trees it is important to mention the date palm, *bnr*^c—the word means "sweet"—a garden tree common both in the dynastic period and in modern Egypt, because its fruit is one of the main foods, and also the acacia (*šnd*), a tree which has always been very common.^d

The broad-leafed perseia (*išd*) tree,^e whose fruit is mentioned in the texts from the oldest times, is described in the lists of sacred groves in seventeen nomes of Upper and Lower Egypt. Later on we shall see that this tree was of great importance in the temple cult in Heliopolis and Herakleopolis, the capitals of the thirteenth and twentieth Upper Egyptian nomes.

In addition to these trees, there are many others which will be mentioned in connection with the different sanctuaries.

II. NOMES WITH "COATS-OF-ARMS" PROVING WORSHIP OF TREE DIVINITIES

Egypt was divided into forty-two provinces or nomes, twenty-two in Upper and twenty in Lower Egypt. A few words must be devoted to the "coat-of-arms" of the thirteenth-fourteenth province, Lykonpolis-Kush, which together formed originally only an older and larger prov-

¹ Superior reference letters indicate Egyptian texts cited in the discussion; these are reproduced in Figs. 1-5.

² Rosellini, *Monumenti dell' Egitto et della Nubia*, Vol. II, Pl. LXIX: Qurneh Tomb No. 96A (Sennufer), Garden of Amenhotep II.

³ N. M. Davies, *Ancient Egyptian Paintings*, Vol. II, Pl. LXIX: The pool in the garden from an unlocated tomb at Thebes.















Greek Name	Egyptian Name	Sacred Grove
7 Diospolis parva (Hu)		ḏḏḏ ḏḏḏ
8 Abydos		Destroyed
9 Panopolis (Achmim)		Destroyed
10 Aphroditopolis		ḏḏḏ ḏḏḏ
11 Hypsele		ḏḏḏ ḏḏḏ
12 Hierakonpolis		ḏḏḏ
13 Lykopolis		ḏḏḏ
14 Aphroditopolis (Kussai)		ḏḏḏ
15 Hermopolis		ḏḏḏ
16 Nibis (Hebenu)		ḏḏḏ ḏḏḏ ḏḏḏ
17 Kynopolis		ḏḏḏ ḏḏḏ
18 Hipponis		ḏḏḏ
19 Oxyrhynchus		Not mentioned
20 Herakleopolis magna (Ahnas)		ḏḏḏ

FIG. 2























Greek Name	Egyptian Name	Sacred Grove
21 Krokodilopolis		𓂏𓂏𓂏 𓂏𓂏𓂏
22 Aphroditopolis		𓂏𓂏𓂏
2) The nomes of Lower Egypt:		
Greek Name	Egyptian Name	Sacred Grove
1 Memphis		𓂏𓂏𓂏 𓂏𓂏𓂏 𓂏𓂏𓂏
2 Letopolis		𓂏𓂏𓂏 𓂏𓂏𓂏
3 Apis		𓂏𓂏𓂏 𓂏𓂏𓂏
4 Prosopis		𓂏𓂏𓂏 𓂏𓂏𓂏
5 Sais		𓂏𓂏𓂏 𓂏𓂏𓂏 𓂏𓂏𓂏
6 Xoïs		𓂏𓂏𓂏 𓂏𓂏𓂏
7 Metelis		𓂏𓂏𓂏 𓂏𓂏𓂏
8 Herakleopolis parva		𓂏𓂏𓂏 𓂏𓂏𓂏
9 Busiris		𓂏𓂏𓂏 𓂏𓂏𓂏 𓂏𓂏𓂏
10 Athribis		𓂏𓂏𓂏 𓂏𓂏𓂏
11 Kabasa		Not mentioned

FIG. 3

12 Sebennytus		 𓆎𓅓
13 Heliopolis (On)		𓆎𓅓 𓆎𓅓
14 Tanis		𓆎𓅓 𓆎𓅓
15 Hermopolis parva		𓆎𓅓 𓆎𓅓 𓆎𓅓
16 Mendes		𓆎𓅓 𓆎𓅓 𓆎𓅓
17 Diospolis inferior		𓆎𓅓 𓆎𓅓
18 Bubastis		𓆎𓅓
19 Pelusium (Buto)		𓆎𓅓 𓆎𓅓
20 Arabia (Phakusa)		𓆎𓅓 𓆎𓅓

[illegible]

FIG. 4

ince symbolized at first by a broad-leaved tree *ndf.t*⁴ and later designated by the compound word *ḏf 3f*,⁵ the interpretation of which is still unknown. The combined twentieth–twenty-first Upper Egyptian province had an oleander (*n^cr.t*;^h cf. Coptic 2HNHC) as its sacred tree. Different from the coat-of-arms of the thirteenth–fourteenth province, this tree is provided with a ribbon hanging from the side of the trunk. From the Fifth Dynasty on, an arm is substituted for this ribbon, a fact which indicates the intention of the Egyptians to anthropomorphize their tree divinities.⁴

In the thirteenth–fourteenth Upper Egyptian nome, Sethe thought to find the prototype of the historical Hathor of Kusae.⁵ In the Old Kingdom, Hathor was also identified with the tree-goddess, for instance in the famous Hathor cults at Memphis, where she was called “The Mistress of the Southern Sycamore” (*Nb.t nh.t rš.t*).¹

In Kôm el Hîṣn, the capital of the third Lower Egyptian nome, whose coat-of-arms represented a falcon,¹ the falcon-god Horus was worshiped. From this place he made his way to the rest of Egypt. The goddess Hathor also had her home at Kôm el Hîṣn. Her name (*H.t-Hr*)^k means the “house of Horus,” that is to say, the “mother of Horus,” for in the inscriptions a mother is often called the house of her child. This local Hathor had other names, such as “She who remembers Horus” (*Šb3.t Hr*),¹ and “The Mistress of the Date Palms” (*Nb.t im3w*)^m —*im3w* being the name of the male palm in distinction to the above-mentioned *bnr*. (*Nb.t im3w* also indicates that Hathor originally was taken not for a cow but for a tree-goddess. Sethe, for example, supposed her to be a forest-goddess.)⁶

Prior to the Heliopolitan Hathor there probably existed a still earlier tree-goddess. A similar situation prevailed in many other districts of Egypt. It is characteristic of the Egyptians to identify the great deities of the country with local gods and goddesses. Other goddesses such as Tefnut and Sakhmet were regarded as lion-goddesses.

In the neighborhood of Heliopolis there was a shrine for the female counterpart of the sun-god Atum. She was Saosis who was a personification of the god’s hand. In this place Atum’s children, Shu and Tefnut, were born, and here the sacred acacia was worshiped. An execration text from the late period contains the following passage in connection with the god Seth:⁷ “He has approached the wonderful hall of Saosis with the acacia tree in which life and death are contained.”^a

The acacia is described as the tree sacred to Horus in Pyramid Text 436a–b:⁸ “W. is Horus who comes forth from the acacia to whom it was commanded: ‘Beware of the lion.’ May he come forth to whom it was commanded: ‘Beware of the lion.’”^o Thus there is mentioned in the Horus myth a place where the god as a little child took refuge under an acacia.

In Šaft el Hēne in the twentieth Lower Egyptian nome, the main cult of which was called “The House of the Zizyphus tree (*h.t nbs*)”^p will be found the probable rudiments of a male tree deity showing the god Sopdu in the form of a falcon idol reclining on a bed and bearing the epithet, “He who is under his *kšb.t* tree.” See, for example, Pyramid Text 436a–b: “They praise P. as well as the *Dw3w*, as well as 3Bhs who is at the head of the Nubian country, as well as Sopdu who lives under his *kšb.t* trees”;^q also Pyramid Text 994b–d: “The fields of Iaru praise thee in thy

⁴ Newberry, “The Tree of the Herakleopolite Nome,” *ÄZ*, L (1912), 78.

⁵ *Urgeschichte*, p. 57.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 64.

⁷ Schott, *Urkunden VI*, p. 20.

⁸ The Pyramid Texts mentioned in this article are cited from Sethe’s edition.

name of *Dw3w*, like Sopdu who lives under his *ksb.t* trees."⁷

The Pyramid Texts also associate the god Sobk with the *ksb.t* trees:⁸ "(Like) Sobk, ruler of *B3hw*, thou wilt go through thy fields and through thy *ksb.t* woods."⁹ Bahu was probably located in the neighborhood of the Fayyum, which is identical with the seventh Lower Egyptian nome. In the cult name, "He who is under his moringa tree," there may be concealed an old male tree divinity. According to their names, these cult places were situated in groves.

However, it is clear that though there may have been reliefs or statues of deities with their sacred animals in the shelter of a sacred tree serving as a place of worship for the Egyptians, such gods were not regarded as tree deities. For instance, at the temple of Dakke "The House of the *nbs* tree"¹⁰ shows the sacred baboon of Thoth sitting under a tree, yet he was never regarded as a tree deity.¹⁰

The beautiful gardens around the tombs and mortuary temples mentioned above evolved from the sacred trees along the desert edge. At first they were only located in Upper Egypt, but later on they became popular in all the forty-two nomes, where they were located in the vicinity of the necropolis on the elevated terrain beyond the cultivation which was called the *33.t*.¹¹

In the topographical lists of the Ptolemaic temples there is a description of the individual trees in each grove of the different nomes.¹¹ The accompanying list of sacred groves is intended to show how the names of the provinces are written both in the Greek (or Latin) and Egyptian lan-

guages. The list indicates that the sycamore, the persea, the date palm, and the acacia were the most common.¹²

The geographical texts are arranged and carved on the walls in the following manner: In the middle of the wall in the background the image of the main god is shown in a double representation. He was considered as the patron saint of the whole province. On one side of the god the king is represented wearing the white crown of Upper Egypt in festival procession together with the personified nomes of Upper Egypt. On the other side the same scene is repeated, but here the king wears the Lower Egyptian crown and is accompanied by the Lower Egyptian nomes. Each of the provinces is making sacrifice to the god. Behind each of them there are three vertical lines of hieroglyphs, first the name of the nome, then that of its capital, and finally that of the chief god of the nome. In addition, the names of the high priest and priestess are included, as well as those of the sacred bark and the landing place. Finally, there follows the enumeration of the sacred groves according to the list reproduced in the right column of the table.

III. THE TREE IN EGYPTIAN COSMOGONY

Among the Egyptian ideas of the hereafter was that of a sycamore located in the eastern horizon, in the branches of which different deities were believed to dwell. It is associated in the myths with the sun-god. The existence of a supernatural tree, or even of a "world tree," is found among the cosmogonic conceptions of numerous primitive peoples of the world.¹² For example, the ash Yggdrasil of Scandinavian mythology—the tree in which the gods held council every day—was actually believed to support the sky. Some of its branches spread over the entire earth; one

⁷ No. 456a.

⁸ G. Roeder, *Der Tempel von Dakke*, Vol. II, Pls. 121a and 143.

¹¹ The list of sacred groves is derived from Moldenke, *Über die in altaegyptischen Texten erwähnten Bäume und deren Verwerthung*, p. 13, with corrections from E. Chassinat, *Le Temple d'Edfou*, I (1897), 329–44.

¹² T. H. Philpot, *The Sacred Tree* (London, 1897), pp. 109 ff.

great branch led to the *Aes*,¹³ another to the Frost-fighters, and a third to *Niflheim*.¹⁴ Such trees may have been the answer to man's speculation about the position of the sun, moon, and stars in the firmament of heaven, and the means by which, without falling, they held to their courses above the earth. In one form or another such trees existed in the mythology of India, Persia, China, Japan, and many other countries, sometimes as dwellings of the gods, frequently as sources of immortality, but often in situations of less significance.¹⁵ In the Egyptian texts the function of the tree is not always consistent or easy to comprehend.

Pyramid Text 1485*a* describes one concept of such a supernatural tree: "Hail thou Sycamore who protects the god under which the gods of the underworld are standing."¹⁶ See also Pyramid Text 916*a-b*: "The high places bring him to the places of Seth and to that high sycamore of the eastern sky when it has bent down (its branches) on which the gods are."¹⁷ The text thus refers to the dead man and his last journey to the sycamore in the eastern horizon. The gods are accustomed to sit in this tree like those birds whose forms are assumed by the souls of the dead.

Chapter 109 of the Book of the Dead gives a description of the two sycamores of turquoise which stand before the entrance of the sky from which the sun-god Re comes forth every morning: "I know the two sycamores of turquoise between which Re comes forth, when he passes over the supports of Shu to the gate of the lord of the east from which Re comes forth."¹⁸ The vignette in the papyrus of Nu (Eighteenth Dynasty) shows the sun-

god with falcon head and wearing the sun disk with uraeus. A spotted calf is placed before the god, and the deceased is standing behind the calf. The vignette in the Saitic recension is different. The sun-god indeed is represented with a falcon head and sun disk with uraeus; however, he is now standing in a boat, while a calf with a shining star over its head is placed before him and the deceased behind him. The boat is sailing through the gate with the two sycamores. Chapter 64, which is believed to be one of the oldest chapters of the Book of the Dead, mentions only one sycamore. Both versions are carved on the sarcophagus of Queen Mentuhotep of the Eleventh Dynasty. The inscription states that one of the versions dates from the time of King Usephais of the First Dynasty. This information is naturally not to be taken literally; the Egyptians always liked to romanticize their stories by claiming that they dated from one of the first dynasties. Another version of chapter 64 reads: "I have embraced the sycamore and I have joined the sycamore."¹⁹ The accompanying vignette from the papyrus of Nebsenu (early Eighteenth Dynasty) shows a man with his hands in the usual attitude of adoration before a tree with a sun disk rising over its top.

IV. THE ROLE OF THE SACRED TREE IN THE EGYPTIAN IDEAS OF LIFE AFTER DEATH

The Egyptians conceived of a life in the hereafter which was not very dissimilar to their earthly existence; thus the deceased hoped to be able to walk in the shadow of the trees which he had planted while he was still alive. In the chapel of Ineni (Thutmosis I) is carved the following inscription:²⁰ "He goes through his district in the west (that is, the necropolis) and refreshes himself under his *nh.t* trees²¹ and

¹³ The *Aes* were the chief gods, such as Thor and Odin.

¹⁴ *Niflheim*, the land of shadows, corresponds to the Greek Hades; see further Finn Magnussen, *Edda-laeren*.

¹⁵ Cf. Gen. 3:1-12; Kramer, *Gilgamesh and the Huluppu-Tree*.

¹⁶ Brugsch, *Rec. de mon.*, Pl. XXXVI.

¹⁷ The word *nh.t* in this case refers to trees in general.

inspects those beautiful gardens which he planted on earth while in the favor of this sublime god Amun the lord of Thebes."^{aa}

Pyramid Text 808a-b describes how the different trees in the hereafter serve the deceased. "The *im*³ tree serves thee, the *nb*³ tree turns its head to thee as Anubis does for thee (that is, as Anubis will cause to be done for thee)."^{bb} The soul (*ba*) of the deceased already mentioned in Section III was allowed, like the gods, to sit on the branches of the sacred tree.

It is in connection with the sacred *išd* tree—the tree of the royal annals—that the *bennu* bird (sometimes incorrectly identified with the phoenix of the Greeks) played its most important role, for in the annals it assumed the incarnation of the soul of Re. Thus it is stated on the Metternich stela:¹⁸ "Thou art the great *Bennu* which arises on the willow in the great hall of the princes in Heliopolis."^{cc}

Several representations in temples of the long period beginning with Thutmosis III and extending into the late time show Amen-Re, Thoth, and the librarian goddess Seshat writing the names of the reigning king on the fruits and leaves of the sacred tree. This ceremony is intended to give the king a long and happy life. In Medinet Habu a representation shows Atum, the lord of Heliopolis, conducting the king to the *išd* tree, while his name is being inscribed on its fruits by Amen-Re. This cult was so important that it did not stop with the decay of Heliopolis but continued well into the Ptolemaic period. Heliopolis was nevertheless regarded as the place for the main cult, as is proved by the inscription on the London obelisk:¹⁹ "The venerable *išd* tree in the midst of the *Bennu* house."^{dd}

It was also supposed that a cat was

sitting in the shade of the *išd* tree, and chapter 17 of the Book of the Dead gives the following description:²⁰ "I am the cat who split the side of the *išd* tree in the night when the enemies of the All-Lord were destroyed. Who is that male cat? It is Re himself who is called *mīw* because of the speech of Sia. He is like that which he has made, thus his name is cat." Variant: "It is Shu who takes care of the testament of Geb in favor of Osiris. Concerning the splitting of the side of the *išd* tree in Heliopolis, it is the children of the weak ones who correct what they have done."^{ee} The sentence could be translated, "He is the example of what he has done." Like Yahweh in the Jewish religion, Re created everything in his own image.

In the New Kingdom the flowers of the sacred *išd* tree were very much desired by the Egyptians, who considered them as life-giving, and for that reason called them "flowers of life." The *išd* and the lotus flower were used for funerals, just as flowers are still used in modern times. Statues and coffins of the deceased were decorated with garlands of flowers. For example, a great many of them were found in the tomb of Tutankhamun.²¹

V. THE DIFFERENT TOMBS OF OSIRIS AND THE SACRED TREES CON- NECTED WITH THEM

The tomb of Osiris was assigned by the Egyptians to many different places all over Egypt. As soon as his cult became popular, a sacred grove was attached to each cult place as a dwelling for the *ba* of the god. For instance, the tomb of Osiris in Busiris was the oldest site of this type. The cult of Osiris was especially associated with Abydos, Memphis, Heliopolis, and Herakleopolis. In the last three places it was combined with sacred groves out-

¹⁸ Golenischef, *Metternichstela*, I. 77. Note that the Metternich text has confused the willow tree with the persea (*išd*) of the annals.

¹⁹ Budge, *Cleopatra's Needles*, p. 171.

²⁰ Budge, *Book of the Dead*, I (1910), 69, 54.

²¹ Carter, *The Tomb of Tut. Ankh. Amen*, II, 125, Pl. XXII.

side the city. Finally, the island of Bighé opposite Philae was regarded as a place where Osiris was buried.

Each year the mysteries of Osiris were celebrated by the people in Abydos, where the tomb of Osiris was located behind the temple of Sethos I. A description of these mysteries was found on the tombstone of Ichernofret.²² However, a better idea of the cult of Osiris and the mysteries connected with him is afforded by inscriptions and representations on the walls of the so-called gate of Hadrian in Philae.²³ Milk was poured out at the foot of the trees of the Abaton, the sacred tomb of Osiris. The inscriptions tell that the milk libations revived and rejuvenated the god, for it was believed that he was to be born again and would require milk after the manner of a small child.

There is also at Philae a description of a cedar tree in whose branches dwelt the soul of Osiris. Plutarch tells that the cedar tree (which he called a methide plant) was taller than the highest olive tree.²⁴ A similar scene with the soul of Osiris in the shape of a bird is often shown in connection with the pictures of the tomb of Osiris in Diospolis parva. The coffin of Osiris is situated in the shade of a willow-like tree regarded by some Egyptologists as a tamarisk. The soul of Osiris is here represented in the form of a *bennu*-bird. Philae was believed to be unapproachable so that even birds and fish did not dare to come into its neighborhood. Nevertheless, at a certain time the priests sailed to the island with mortuary offerings and adorned the tomb where it stood in the shade of the cedar tree. This was probably reminiscent of the cedar at Byblos. According to the legend, the coffin of Osiris which his wicked brother Seth had thrown

into the water landed at Byblos in the neighborhood of a tree which grew up around the coffin and which inclosed it in its trunk. This representation occurs in the south temple of Osiris in Dendera.²⁵

On the south wall of the gate of Hadrian is an unusual representation of Osiris. He is clothed in the customary tight garments and is provided with the *atef*-crown, the crook, and the flail. But he stands in the midst of a tree which is growing up from a small pool. Thus in this case he is regarded as a tree-god, though generally he is represented as a corn-god with grain growing from his corpse—as, for instance, in the great temple of Isis at Philae.

In a ceremony described in Firmicus Maternus a cedar was felled; the pith was taken out and an image of Osiris formed of it, after which it was replaced in the trunk.²⁶ Those who worshiped Osiris as a tree-god were not allowed to damage trees or to fill up the wells necessary for irrigation.

VI. THE ANTHROPOMORPHISM OF FETISHES

It is difficult to say exactly when the prehistoric Egyptians began to give human forms to the objects which they worshiped; it was probably a natural development of their religion as they advanced in culture. It can at least be established that the Egyptian desire to anthropomorphize began already before the union of the two lands. In distinction to the deities in animal forms, the fetishistic gods and goddesses were very often represented in human form carrying their fetishes in their hands or as an adornment on their heads.

Among the tree and plant deities which were anthropomorphized, the god Nefer-tem played an important role in the Memphitic doctrine of creation. He is described in Pyramid Text 266a: "W. comes forth

²² Sethe, *Lesestücke*, p. 70.

²³ Junker, *Götterdekret über das Abaton*.

²⁴ Hopfner, *Monographien des Archiv orientální*, "Plutarch über Osiris und Isis."

²⁵ Dendera, IV, 66.

²⁶ *De errore profanarum religionum* II. 6.

as Nefertem, as the lotus at the nose of Re."^{ff} One of the myths of creation tells how the sun first rose from a lotus in the primeval ocean. When Nefertem was anthropomorphized, the lotus was placed on his head.

Some plants merely succeeded in becoming attributes of the gods, as for instance the lettuce plant which played a role in connection with Min of Coptos, who is very often represented with a stand of lettuce behind him. This plant (*Lactuca sativa longifolia*), together with our so-called head lettuce, derives probably from the wild *Lactuca scariola* L. However, it must be remembered that the identification of Egyptian trees and plants from painted or sculptured representations is rendered exceedingly difficult because of the marked tendency to stylize these objects in art. Pictures in Karnak, Medinet Habu, and Edfu show the king presenting a lettuce plant to Min or Amun. Such representations are accompanied with the following short sentence, "Giving lettuce to Min."^{27gg}

The lettuce was associated with the ithyphallic gods, almost certainly because of its milk-white sap which the Egyptians probably connected with the sperm of the gods and which naturally had to be replenished if the procreative role of the god was to continue effective. In addition, it can be mentioned that the Egyptians themselves ate considerable amounts of lettuce and considered this plant a valuable aid in the propagation of offspring. Min was often worshiped under the cypresses, which were sacred to him.

Other plants to which the Egyptians applied the epithet "*šps*" ("holy" or "sublime") were dill and onion. The latter was still worshiped as a god at Pelusium in the Christian Era.²⁸

²⁷ ÄZ, LIX (1924), 140.

²⁸ Jacoby in *Receuil de travaux*, XXXIV (1912), 9.

VII. GODDESSES IN THE TREE CULT IN THE BOOK OF THE DEAD

It was not the Egyptian gods, however, but the goddesses who played the greatest part in the tree cult, and numerous descriptions of them occur in the religious literature.

The Pyramid Texts quoted in Section III only mention the sycamore without connecting it with a particular deity. In the Book of the Dead, however, the goddesses in the tree are identified with Nut or Hathor. Chapter 59 of the Book of the Dead, in the Papyrus of Any (dating from the end of the Eighteenth Dynasty), is called "The Chapter of Snuffing the Air and Having Dominion over the Water in the Underworld."^{hh} It gives the following description of the goddess:²⁹ "Hail thou sycamore of Nut, give thou to me of (the water and of) the air which are in thee. I embrace this throne in Heliopolis. I guard the egg of the great cackler; it grows, I grow; it lives, I live; it snuffs the air, I snuff the air; I the Osiris Any, triumphant."ⁱⁱ

This chapter is of great importance because it confirms the assumption that the sycamore of Nut was originally located in Hermopolis. Here was the primeval hill, on the top of which was placed the egg which constituted the central point in the creation. From this egg the sun rose to the sky in the form of a cackling fowl by means of which light and sound were created.

The vignette of this chapter shows the deceased kneeling at a pool in the midst of which a sycamore is growing. In the tree itself the goddess is depicted in human form as far as the knees, with the lower extremities hidden in the tree. The goddess extends her arms toward the deceased, with a tray of food in one hand and a jar of water in the other. This representation is

²⁹ Budge, *Book of the Dead*, I, 170, 1.

one of the most common methods of portraying goddesses in the tree cult.

Chapter 68, which is called "The Chapter of Coming Forth by Day,"³⁰ relates of Ḥathor and the sacred date palm:³⁰ "In a clean place I shall sit on the ground beneath the foliage of the date palm of Ḥathor who presides over the spacious disk. She advances to Heliopolis bearing the writings of the divine words of the library of Thoth."³¹ The vignette of the papyrus of Nu which contains chapter 68 represents the deceased sitting at the feet of Ḥathor enthroned. The divinity is adorned with the famous Ḥathor crown consisting of two cows' horns inclosing the sun disk with uraeus. In this case the sacred tree is behind both the deceased and the goddess, and Ḥathor is likewise detached from the tree.

VIII. REPRESENTATIONS OF TREE-GODDESSES IN PICTORIAL ART

A. IN THE THEBAN TOMBS

As early as the second part of the Eighteenth Dynasty a change was perceptible in the representations on the walls of the Theban tombs. Secular pictures gave way more and more to those of religious content until in the Nineteenth Dynasty the latter prevailed altogether. Scenes from the Book of the Dead which deal with Osiris as a judge in the underworld, and representations of the goddess of the sycamore who feeds the deceased, become very frequent. The earliest figure of this goddess is twice depicted on the south wall of the tomb of Nakht (reign of Thutmosis IV),³¹ where she stands on either side of a sumptuous offering-table. In one hand she is provided with a tray of food, while the other holds a long papyrus stem—the symbol of prosperity commonly shown in all periods as an attribute of goddesses.

The most remarkable feature of this representation is that the goddess is adorned with the sycamore on her head. The sacred tree is regarded here rather as a symbol like the lotus on the head of Nefertem as discussed in Section VI. This scene was enlarged and altered a great deal in the Nineteenth Dynasty. Already in the tomb of Amenmose (which probably belongs to the reign of King Eye) the goddess is standing in the tree distributing food and drink to the *ba*-birds of the deceased under the tree.³² This representation of the birds perhaps reflects observation of nature; the Egyptians were accustomed to see the desert birds gathered like Beduins under the shade of the sycamore in order to quench their thirst at the well.

In the tomb of Userhet (period of Sethos I) the deceased is depicted as he sits with his wife and mother in the shade of a big sycamore. Before them is a small T-shaped lake from which two birds with human heads are drinking. Above the two women are two *ba*-birds in flight. In the background is the goddess Nut with a tree on her head. This, however, is more stylized than in the example from the tomb of Amenmose; the goddess is now standing on the bank of a little rectangular pool as she offers a libation vase and a tray with various loaves to the deceased and his family.³³

In the tomb of Tjanufer in Dirâc Abu 'n-Naga (time of Ramesses II), there is a relief with the following scene: The owner of the tomb is seated at the right; before him is a *ka*-like table on a standard¹¹ behind which stands a leafless sycamore tree bearing a few figs. The tree goddess, standing among the main branches of the tree, is represented in human form with only the feet hidden; she grasps in one hand a

³⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 6, 10.

³¹ Davies, *The Tomb of Nakht at Thebes*, Pl. X.

³² Wreszinski, *Atlas*, Vol. I, Pl. 120.

³³ Davies, *Two Ramesside Tombs at Thebes*, Pls. I and X.

small basket with figs from the tree, while the other pours several streams of water from a vase for a *ba*-bird with human head on the ground beneath.³⁴

Two paintings of special interest for the tree cult occur in the well-preserved tomb of Sennedjem at Deir el-Medina (Nineteenth Dynasty). One of them illustrates chapter 59 of the Book of the Dead, from which a passage has already been translated in Section VII. The scene reveals the deceased and his wife kneeling at their tomb. In front of them the goddess Nut is shown standing in a sycamore; her legs and the lower part of her body are hidden in the trunk of the tree, which is laden with fruit and well covered with thick foliage. Nut offers the usual water jar and tray of bread, and Sennedjem and his wife are depicted as they extend their hands to receive the gifts.

The second painting illustrates chapter 109 of the Book of the Dead (referred to in Sec. III). The sun-god is depicted with falcon head, uraeus, and sun disk. Behind him stands the deceased on a much smaller scale than the god. Beside these two figures and between two sycamore trees is a black-and-white spotted calf, the symbol of the newborn sun-god. In addition, the sun is depicted as a disk illuminating the tops of the trees.³⁵

B. ON STELAS, OFFERING-TABLES, ETC.

A rather different representation of the sacred tree and its goddess, also dating from the Nineteenth Dynasty, occurs on a limestone stela in the Cairo Museum.³⁶ Here a man named Kamose is seen with his wife at the foot of the tree of Nut, from which two arms alone are extended. One arm grasps a libation vase, the other a tray filled with numerous dishes which are

being offered to the couple. This picture is especially interesting because it is reminiscent of the representations of the coat-of-arms of the twentieth–twenty-first Upper Egyptian nome mentioned in Section II, where the beginning of the anthropomorphism of the goddess in the tree is to be seen.

Such scenes in which the goddess is indicated merely by two arms extended from the tree became especially popular in representations on offering-tables from Achmim in the Ptolemaic period. These limestone tables are in the form of the Egyptian *htp* sign.³⁷ Besides the offering scenes they contain inscriptions from chapters 59 and 62 of the Book of the Dead.³⁷

The rectangular slab of offering-table No. 23160 in Cairo has a line of inscriptions extending all about the top edge. Within the channel, chapter 59 of the Book of the Dead is carved in vertical columns. On the left is a relief representing the deceased sitting before a tree which is drawn only in outline and from which small twigs extend. The complete figure of Nut is in the tree; she extends her arms toward the deceased and is provided with two libation vases from which streams are flowing into the hands of the deceased. This picture is quite similar to representations which are found in the Theban tombs.

No. 23162 is also adorned with inscriptions taken from chapters 59 and 62 of the Book of the Dead. Two scenes are here divided by a large *nh* sign and two libation bases placed over a rectangular pool. On both sides of the vases are beautiful bunches of lotus flowers and all kinds of delicious dishes, including roast beef, ducks, and miscellaneous loaves and cakes. On the right is the same scene as the one shown on No. 23160. On the left

³⁴ Wreszinski, *Bericht über die photographische Expedition von Kairo bis Wadi Halfa*, Taf. 73.

³⁵ Campbell, *The Miraculous Birth of King Amenhotep III and Other Egyptian Studies*, pp. 149–50.

³⁶ Maspero, *Guide* (1884), p. 427, No. 6050.

³⁷ Ahmed Bey Kamal, *Tables d'offrandes*, Vols. I–II, Pls. XLI–XLIV.

is a picture of the deceased standing before a tree, but here, as on the Nineteenth Dynasty stela mentioned above, the goddess is symbolized by two arms only, which are extended from among the branches holding the libation vase and a tray with fruit.

The offering-tables have representations either of the tree with the anthropomorphized goddess or with the two arms alone. Sometimes water only is being offered from the tree, while no food is represented. The two texts of the Book of the Dead which accompany the pictures on the offering-tables are called "The Chapter of Snuffing the Air and of Having Dominion over the Water in the Underworld." and "The Chapter of Drinking Water in the Underworld."ⁿⁿ

The latest development of the anthropomorphism of the tree-goddess in which the tree appears merely as a symbol adorning the head of the goddess, as represented in the Theban tombs, is not to be found on the offering-tables, where the designer became increasingly negligent with the pictures of the trees. On No. 23161, which shows Nut as a complete figure, the tree is indicated very indistinctly, with numerous small twigs which appear to be growing from the body of the goddess.

Representations of the tree-goddess which appear to show a being partly human and partly dendromorphous, as suggested by the fact that her legs often disappear amid the branches, inevitably raise the question whether such a composite divinity was envisaged by the Egyptians. In view of the fact, however, that contemporary scenes employed with identical purpose frequently depict a purely human divinity beside the tree, it must be concluded that these incomplete figures merely represent an Egyptian effort at realistic portrayal of what was conceived to be visible. The missing portions of the goddess are simply concealed by parts of

the tree; she is not supposed to be growing out of the tree as an inseparable part of it.

A few representations have survived of a type of sacred tree associated with Hathor which does not occur with other deities and which likewise does not exist elsewhere in Egyptian art. It is a leafless and obviously a very ancient tree. Accompanying inscriptions prove it to be the southern sycamore at the temple of Ptah in Memphis (see Sec. II).

An Eighteenth Dynasty stela in Florence³⁸ shows a leafless tree^{oo} standing in a container of clay intended to retain the water which was provided for its nourishment. In the tree Hathor is depicted in human form except for a cow's head, which is adorned with the special diadem of two cow's horns inclosing a sun disk with two long feathers. The lower extremities of the goddess are hidden in the tree. She extends her arms and with one hand pours water from a libation vase to a woman on the right of the tree; the other hand supports a tray of bread. At the foot of the tree, a *ba*-bird with human head is shown in highly naturalistic fashion drinking from a pool.

On the left of a limestone stela in the Cook collection³⁹ is depicted a leafless tree, the trunk of which is decorated with a number of ribbons. It stands in a container like that of the Florence stela mentioned above, but, in addition, a number of stones are shown on the container which in the opinion of Fernande Hartmann,⁴⁰ were employed to anchor the roots and to provide a sort of filter for the seeping water. The goddess in the tree, whose lower limbs disappear in the trunk, wears the Isis throne on her head, though she is called *nb.t imn.t*, "Mistress of the West"^{pp} in the accompanying text. She carries in

³⁸ Lanzzone, *Dizionario*, Tav. 322, 1.

³⁹ *Ancient Egypt* (1917), p. 64.

⁴⁰ Hartmann, *L'Agriculture dans l'ancienne Egypte*, p. 111.

the left hand a tray with the customary dishes and in the right a vase from which four streams of water issue forth into the outstretched hands of the wife of the deceased who is standing behind him under the tree. The *ba*-bird is lacking in this scene. According to the inscription above the picture, the stela belonged to a man named Mashakabu Djehutihetep; a second text beneath dates the monument to the Nineteenth Dynasty.

Like that of Nut, the figure of Ḥathor in the tree is more and more often omitted in late times. A sarcophagus from the Persian period represents a sycamore from which two arms are extended in the act of giving wine and bread. The adjacent text indicates that the tree belonged to Ḥathor.⁴¹

In the Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek⁴² there is a sarcophagus lid from the Saitic period with the representation of a chapel-like building on the front of the rectangular socle. On each side of this building the same scene is repeated: the deceased is kneeling before a tree in which a goddess is seen in full figure. She is presenting water to the dead man and his *ba*, the latter in the usual form of a bird with human head. The head of the goddess is adorned with the sign for west, *imn.t*,⁴³ which is the principal insignia of the "Goddess of the West" with whom Ḥathor already in olden time was identified.

A sarcophagus in Cairo, probably from the Persian period, shows that Nut and Ḥathor could appear together.⁴³ On both the head and foot ends occur two sycamores separated from each other by figures of Isis and Nephthys. In one place the text attributes the sycamore to Nut, in another to Ḥathor.

⁴¹ Maspero, *Catalogue*, No. 67.

⁴² Valdemar Schmidt, *Ny Carlsberg Glyptotekets ægyptiske Samling*, p. 303.

⁴³ Cairo Museum, No. 29301.

Isis also was associated with the tree cult and mortuary offerings, but, unlike Nut and Ḥathor, she is not mentioned as a tree-goddess in the Book of the Dead.

A pillar in the tomb of Sennefer at Thebes (reign of Amenophis II) bears a representation of the deceased sitting on a chair together with his wife Meryt (who is shown on a much smaller scale than her husband).⁴⁴ Before them, on the left, is a leafy tree on a standard after the manner of the coats-of-arms of certain nomes. It is interesting to observe how the artist has depicted the roots of the tree sticking out below. A female figure in the tree is identified by a hieroglyphic text as Isis. In contrast to the representations of Nut and Ḥathor, she is provided with neither libation vase nor tray, nor is she characterized by the special Isis throne which she often carries on her head.⁴⁵

A representation on a limestone stela of the Eighteenth–Nineteenth Dynasty in the Kestner Museum in Hannover shows that Isis does not need to be shown as a complete human figure.⁴⁵ In the center of the picture is a leafy tree in the midst of which are depicted a female breast and two extended arms grasping a tray heaped with food and a libation vase from which water issues to a man and woman below. Under the tree are two *ba*-birds, one with a man's head, the other with that of a woman. The text above the representation relates that it is Isis who lives in the tree. She is called "Isis the Great, the God's Mother."⁴⁶

IX. THE TREE CULT IN MODERN EGYPT

Even today many Egyptian peasants continue to believe in and worship sacred trees. Almost every village possesses a sacred tree which is usually connected with the tomb of some famous sheikh.⁴⁶ Some-

⁴⁴ *Receuil de travaux*, XXII (1900), 96.

⁴⁵ *Münchener Jahrbuch*, I (N.F.), 212.

⁴⁶ *JEA*, XI (1924), 56.

times the tree is the only "monument" which serves to decorate the tomb. Large tombs often have more than one tree; that of Sheikh Gadullah of Illahun, for example, is shaded by three sacred trees. The Egyptians frequently ascribe to them a curative effect, and people are asked to show them the greatest respect and care, especially to refrain from breaking off twigs or branches. It is believed, indeed, that violators of such injunctions will immediately suffer a great misfortune, and the fellahin are naturally able to report many examples of such judgments.

Persons who have experienced curative powers of a tree often bring small votive gifts such as handkerchiefs, candles, and the like. The trunks of many sacred trees are studded with long nails hung with small gifts representing prayers which people have spoken in their shade. When, for instance, a man is cured of a headache, he drives into the trunk a nail with hair wound about it.

The tomb of Sheikh Seyd in Minah plays a great role for childless women. They flock to his tomb and perform various ceremonies intended to make them capable of childbirth.

The sheikhs buried in many of the tombs were said to have been murdered. The fellahin, following an old tradition, were accustomed in such cases to mold a clay figure representing the murdered man and to place it at the scene of the crime; the spirit of the deceased then took residence in the figure and ceased henceforth to haunt the spot. Gradually, as the figure weathered away, a tree sprang up from the remains, and in this tree the spirit of the sheikh was believed to dwell.

This custom closely corresponds to the account of the pith of the cedar which was formed in the image of Osiris as mentioned in Section V. It is interesting to see how the idea of the residence of the souls

in the sacred tree has survived through several thousand years.

The tree cult has been very difficult to eradicate in civilized countries. One can mention, for example, the sacred mountain ash of Finland, which the peasants still plant on their farms with deepest veneration.⁴⁷

X. CONCLUSION

As shown above, only three goddesses played a major role in the tree cult, namely, Nut, Hathor, and Isis, all old sky-goddesses. On the other hand, Saosis and the various male deities with whom sacred trees were connected were never identified with the trees themselves. In no other place in the world were deities so closely attached to their trees as in Egypt, whether in the form of an arm extending from the branches of the tree or as a figure in its midst. However, the Egyptians did not have all the complex and mysterious world of fairies, nymphs, dryads, etc., which appeared in other countries. In contradistinction to the Egyptian tree deities, these other tree spirits never enjoyed the same good reputation because many of them were regarded as enemies of mankind.

It will be of some interest to see how Nut, Hathor, and Isis came to play a decisive role in the tree cult. As a sky-goddess, Nut already in the Pyramid Texts had another function as a goddess of the dead. No. 825a-d gives the following description of her: "Thy mother Nut has spread over thee in order that she may protect thee from all evil. Nut has protected thee from all evil, because thou art the greatest among her children."^{tt}

From the Eighteenth Dynasty onward Nut is depicted on the inner side of the coffin lid; according to the Egyptian belief in the magical power of pictures, she was suspended over the dead in a protective

⁴⁷ Philpot, *op. cit.*, p. 19.

capacity. Later, she was represented both on the bottom and on the sides of the coffin so that the deceased rested completely within her protective embrace. Gradually, as the goddess became more and more important for the dead, she appropriated the various roles of the mortuary goddesses. Already in the Thirteenth–Fourteenth Dynasty, texts refer to Nut's presentation of food and drink to the dead.⁴⁸ In the Twenty-first Dynasty her position as a goddess of the dead was established, and she was called *nb.t imnt.t*,⁴⁹ the epithet of the goddess with whom Hathor formerly was identified.

Hathor appears as a goddess of the dead especially in Thebes, where she was worshiped in a rocky cave as the "Mistress of the Necropolis." Like Nut, she was believed to take care of the dead.

Isis—whose name *ʾIs.t*, according to Sethe,⁴⁹ means "seat" or "throne"—appears to have been regarded as the personification of the king's throne. She sometimes had the epithet *ʾs.t wr.t*, which in Egyptian is a term for the king's throne. Furthermore, according to Pyramid Texts 1153b–1154b, she was identified with the place to which the dead was brought in the sky: "She brings him to the great throne which is made by the gods, which is made by Horus, which Thoth has produced. Isis has received him, Nephthys has taken care of him; he has taken his seat on the great throne which is made of the gods."⁵⁰

When the Egyptians considered how the mortuary goddess cared for the dead, their minds naturally drew upon analogies from their own daily life. It was a part of their experience in the oases to find in the sycamore tree a source of refreshment to the weary traveler, for he obtained fruit from the branches of the tree and water

from the spring which bathes its roots. It was thus very natural for his imagination to attribute such gifts to a kindly dryad or tree spirit. In the hereafter, therefore, the deceased was satiated by a goddess of the dead in the form of a tree divinity. This is quite consistent with another picture in the Pyramid Texts which has already been described, in which the *ba* of the deceased, in the shape of a bird, lived in a sycamore on the eastern horizon.

It may be emphasized that the role of Nut and Isis as tree-goddesses was closely connected with the offerings for the dead, while that of Hathor began at an early date in complete independence of mortuary associations, but eventually was absorbed into the same mortuary functions as the other two.

As this naïve and appealing concept of the mortuary offering as the gift of a sacred tree asserted itself with growing force, it gradually, if somewhat belatedly, made its appearance in the art. The pictures occur first of all in the Theban tombs of the Eighteenth Dynasty—no doubt as a result of the well-known Egyptian faith in the magical efficacy of tomb painting and sculpture—and they culminate at the end of the Ptolemaic period on the offering-tables from Achmim. Perhaps the most striking feature of these representations, apart from the genuine beauty and the remarkable variety of treatment with which they are handled in different tombs, is the fact that the Egyptians reversed in them the normal historical development from fetish to anthropomorphized deities. For the ancient artists began to represent the goddesses in anthropomorphized style beside the tree or with the tree as a symbol on their heads, whereas they returned later on to a partial anthropomorphism in which merely an arm remained in the tree.

⁴⁸ Rusch, *Die Entwicklung der Himmelsgöttin Nut zu einer Totengottheit*, p. 52.

⁴⁹ *Lesestücke*, p. 102.